

## Pleasure, Friendships, and Fun

About five years into my fieldwork, Medha and I made a trip together by train from Kolkata to the lovely university town of Shantiniketan, sharing an Airbnb cottage. We had started making the trip about once each year. This time, I planned to use the town as a base to do research in nearby villages, while Medha was looking forward to simply getting away and to purchasing items to decorate her new apartment. Each Saturday, Shantiniketan attracts many weekend visitors to its large, festive outdoor market featuring vibrantly colored local handicrafts.

The trip also coincided with Medha's birthday, and on that very morning, her brother called to convey his birthday greetings. This surprised Medha. They had not spoken in many months, maybe even a year. Medha had not visited her natal home since the event when she had overheard her brother's wife, Boudi, complain about having to cook for Medha, asking, "Does she think this is a hotel?"—an exclusionary utterance which continued to disturb Medha. Medha and her brother spoke briefly and pleasantly, and then the two hung up.

Medha had long felt hurt by Boudi, and I had seen how Medha's hurt and anger can eat away at her, a topic she broached as we sat enjoying our breakfast. I brought up the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, a day of prayer and fasting during which individuals strive to apologize to and seek forgiveness from those we have hurt, as well as to forgive those we have harbored anger against. I described how many people find these acts of forgiveness to be freeing and healing. Maybe it would be helpful for Medha to try to see things from Boudi's perspective and to forgive her?

We talked. Of the two of them, Boudi was the one leading the socially conventional life, meeting prevailing norms of gender through her fifty years of marriage and well-established sons, and receiving respect from her local village community. Yet, to Boudi, it is Medha—the unmarried, single, professionally successful woman—who is the one having fun and opportunities. Boudi was married at age 13. From then on, she had been responsible for cooking for the household, including

for six-year-old Medha. While Boudi had been carrying out the standard norms of femininity for a rural woman—marrying young, cooking, bearing and raising children, deferring to her parents-in-law and husband—Medha had been studying first at home, then going off to live in a college hostel, then getting her PhD from a Kolkata university, then landing a job as a well-paid professor. She was able to use her earnings to travel the country and world, including Egypt and Europe, buy a car, meet an American friend whom she escorted to her natal village for fun, go on meditation retreats, and go out to movies and to restaurant dinners. Boudi had never done any of that.

Medha thanked me for introducing a new perspective. She called her brother back and asked to talk to Boudi. The two did not become close after that point, but Medha no longer harbored so much hurt and anger.

This exchange helped me see a blind spot in my own and some others' thinking. In focusing on hardships in the lives of single women who are not traveling on conventional social paths, I and my interlocutors often implicitly and explicitly imagined married women to be experiencing multiple advantages. Yet, women outside of marriage—especially those who have achieved economic independence—seem often to have more opportunities to express and experience fun and pleasure in their daily lives.

Cross-cultural scholarship on singlehood often emphasizes such themes, too, suggesting that single individuals may be better able than married people to make and maintain friendships, engage with their communities beyond the home, pursue pleasures of their own choosing, and have fun.<sup>1</sup> Natalia Sarkisian and Naomi Gerstel find that in the United States “being single increases the social connections of both women and men” (2016: 361).

At the same time, cultural contexts and social inequalities powerfully shape gendered possibilities for forming friendships and having fun. In India, adult women can face tremendous barriers to pursuing pleasures, friendships, and public fun, barriers which are often heightened for single women, particularly for those beyond the most elite social classes. Obstacles to single women's capacities to experience enjoyment in their everyday lives in India include the following: (1) women are taught to please and serve others rather than seek pleasure for themselves, (2) friendships for adult unmarried women can be strikingly difficult to fashion, and (3) fun for women in public—especially for non-elite and solo women—runs counter to idealized images of gendered respectability. In these ways, many of my interlocutors experienced tremendous barriers to having fun, especially as women alone.

Exploring the ways my interlocutors experience and express enjoyment, pleasure, and fun in daily life, as well as the obstacles they face to having fun, is key to understanding women's singlehood, I came to realize. Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria and Ulka Anjaria argue that we should treat *mazaa*—a Hindi-Urdu word that can mean “fun,” “pleasure,” and “play” (*moja* in Bengali)—as an important theme in

social analysis (2020). Shilpa Phadke writes of fun as “any activity that produces a visceral sense of enjoyment” (2020: 283) and argues for regarding claims to fun as “central to a feminist politics in the twenty-first century” (281). Nida Kirmani suggests that “focusing on the pursuit of fun and enjoyment as an area of academic inquiry can be an important way to show how women push against and challenge patriarchal boundaries” (2020: 319). Brian Horton advocates for not only telling stories of abuse and marginalization when studying queer lives, but also thinking of queer joy, pleasure, and fabulousness as important analytic and political projects (2020).

Exploring pursuits of pleasure, friendships, and fun in my interlocutors’ daily lives, I examine pleasure and fun as domains in which normative ideals of gendered respectability and femininity are both produced and contested. I witnessed how single women felt governed by ideologies restricting their fun, while at the same time many succeeded—in both subtle and rebellious ways, both purposefully and less consciously—to realize enjoyment and pleasure.

#### CONTENDING WITH THE PLEASING SYNDROME

On the topic of pleasure and gender, many women told of how they were raised as girls and women to care for others rather than themselves, and thereby to suppress or deny their own desires. Recall Sana’s poignant narrative from chapter 5: “Once I asked for some yogurt,” she recollected, “and they said there was none. But I knew there was! Then my mother explained that the yogurt is for your brother. . . . After that I never again asked for yogurt in my parents’ home.”

Recall also Medha’s comment, when discussing how seeking and expressing sexual pleasure and desire is so forbidden for single women: “But one thing in this society that you have been seeing—women are not supposed to pleasure themselves! Not for sex, or anything! You are supposed to focus on your family! Sexual pleasure is for having children—and especially for a son!” (chapter 5).

Aparajita articulated the same theme: “We as women have been socialized to care for others and not ourselves.”

In *Chup: Breaking the Silence about India’s Women*, author Deepa Narayan describes such ideologies as making up “the pleasing syndrome” (2018a: 122): “The internalized rule to always take care of others locks a girl into ignoring her own self, her own needs and wants. Slowly it becomes a deeply ingrained habit. . . . Pleasing is in essence training to forget yourself, because if you have your own needs and preferences, it interferes with the total focus on serving others” (2018a: 94–95). Sarah Pinto explores similar insights expressed by a professor and activist for women’s rights in India who argues that the dependent position of women within the family fosters “a state of identity that distances women from their own desires” (2014a: 246). Deepa Narayan tells of how little girls are socialized into not developing preferences in the first place. Ginny, 25,

with a degree in finance, recalled how she used to love soda as a young girl and would ask for it, until her parents told her to stop: “What will people think? . . . She is so shameless” (D. Narayan 2018a: 95). Narayan goes on to reflect how “the pleasing syndrome . . . keeps women half-alive to keep on serving others and half-dead to serve themselves. Pleasing as a moral life principle simply means do not exist for the self but exist only for others” (2018a: 122–123). This principle impacts subjective senses of self-worth: who is allowed to have desires and who isn’t?

Operating in the lives of both married and single women, this pleasing syndrome can feel particularly constraining for women who cannot use their families as channels for some of their desires. So, it is OK for a woman to purchase and prepare delicious foods if her children or husband or parents-in-law will (also) be enjoying them. It is acceptable for a woman to buy consumer goods for her home—maybe a nicer fridge, a large color TV, a washing machine—if her children and husband need and want them, too. Smitha Radhakrishnan explores how young professional IT women in urban India think about their new access to consumption stemming from their professional incomes. In many of these women’s eyes and the eyes of their families, “materialism . . . must begin and end in the family. . . . The deeply troubling kind of consumption . . . was not the consumption of consumer goods per se, but rather consumer spending that is disconnected from family life” (2009: 204–205).

Medha recognized these ideologies about women and pleasure, and criticized how everyone is always asking a single woman for money, if she has a job. “If she were married,” Medha explained, “they wouldn’t think of asking her for money, because they would believe that her family needs it. But if she’s single, they can’t fathom that she would spend the income on herself.”

Medha at one point decided to use some of her income to buy a car, a luxury and convenience she enjoyed at first, until her various family members—her brother, nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews—all kept asking her to loan or give the car to them, conveying their skepticism about a single woman needing or wanting a car for herself. Due to all this haranguing, Medha ended up selling the car within just a few years.

Women’s consumption, pleasure, and value is expected to be channeled into the reproduction of the family, whether natal or marital; but women cannot easily claim pleasure and value entirely for themselves. This is a theme we saw also in chapter 3 on a daughter’s and sister’s care, and in chapter 4 while exploring how some single women successfully learn to cultivate pleasurable and sustaining forms of self-care.

A deep, internalized sense of obligation to please and serve others rather than oneself emerged in my fieldwork interactions in several ways, very often simply as an unarticulated mode of being in the world. For instance, when I would bring small gifts from my home, such as dark chocolates and roasted specialty

nuts, my single women interlocutors often could not accept indulging in the treats themselves. Rather, they would promptly open the gifts to offer to any others around, or tell me that they would give the treats to their household deity, who would be delighted. However, women also maneuvered with the obligation to please, finding ways to nurture the self while still maintaining a moral, pleasing, feminine persona.

On this latter point, my research assistant Madhabi and I were struck by how many single women seemed to care for themselves by virtue of caring for Gopal, the cute, infant form of Krishna. Malobika, Hanvi, and Ashapurna were three who found much meaning in caring for the baby deity Gopal in their household shrines. Hanvi, from an old, well-off north Kolkata family who now lives all alone in her sixties, the one who asserted her own self-care when experiencing cancer, explained that many single women find a particular attachment to Gopal—divinity in the form of an infant they never had. Ashapurna said, “I used to really long for a son, and Gopal has fulfilled that longing.” It is a practice in Hindu worship to provide daily care, or *seva*, for the images (*murti*) of deities by clothing, bathing, and feeding them. Then, the caregivers may consume the deities’ leftovers as holy *prasad*. So, the women who cared for Gopal could ultimately eat treats like special chocolates or nuts, and other delicious and nourishing meals, by first affectionately and reverently offering the foods to their beloved deity, Gopal. I would ask Hanvi sometimes when we met up, just as a matter of small talk, “What did you eat today?” She would reply, “Well, Gopal has to eat, so I cooked up some rice and vegetables for him and fed him, and so I ate a little, too.”

Malobika, the working-class woman in her fifties residing in the Government of West Bengal Working Girls’ Hostel, almost never ate anything without first offering it to Gopal. Fortunately for her, she related, Gopal absolutely loves milk and milk products like butter and yogurt, and she herself absolutely loves milk, too! (Legends of the baby Krishna are replete with stories of his loving milk and butter.) Malobika was disappointed that I myself cannot have milk in my tea, due to lactose intolerance. It would have been really hard for her to take her own tea with luxurious milk while giving me merely black tea, except that Malobika could prepare milk for Gopal as well, who loves it so much. “I’ll warm the milk up for him, and then I’ll put a little in my tea, too,” she would say—signaling her moral goodness as a single woman not unduly indulging in her own pleasures. Through Gopal, Malobika and Hanvi were also able to experience the simple human pleasure of sharing food, even while living without kin.

As Medha came to realize when comparing her life path to that of her married sister-in-law, however, single women can in other ways experience greater freedom than married women to pursue pleasures, especially if they have independent income. Some of my more elite interlocutors had deliberately worked as solo women to transcend the gendered pleasing syndrome, striving to learn to feel free to pursue pleasures of their own choosing, such as by going out alone,

decorating their homes with lovely items, and traveling. This is a topic I explore in this chapter's final section, after first considering two further obstacles to enjoyment in single women's lives vis-à-vis their quests to form friendships and to have public fun.

#### TACKLING THE OBSTACLES TO FORGING FRIENDSHIPS

Cross-cultural literature on singlehood often highlights the importance of friendships in single people's lives.<sup>2</sup> Elyakim Kislev optimistically generalizes that "friendships are something that singles excel at. Recent studies show that singles in many countries have more friends and are better at maintaining their friendships than married people" (2019b). Kislev also suggests that "friendship can serve as a basic building block for the future of the single lifestyle" (2019a: 164). Rebecca Traister, in *All the Single Ladies*, writes that "female friendship has been the bedrock of women's lives for as long as there have been women" (2016: 97). Now that more and more women are marrying late or not at all, "women find themselves growing into themselves, shaping their identities, dreams, and goals not necessarily in tandem with a man or within a traditional family structure, but instead alongside other women. Their friends" (Traister 2016: 97). However, one must be attentive to the ways local cultural contexts and social forces shape the possibilities for forming friendships in diverse and situated ways.

In India, friendship is another important form of pleasure and belonging that can come with serious obstacles for unmarried women because of the ways fashioning friendships across marital-status and class divides is so difficult, and because of how unfamiliar it is to co-reside intimately with non-kin. Sanjaya, Ajay, Anindita, and the others in their single women's support group had successfully established a wonderfully sustaining and enjoyable circle of friends by working hard to find and recruit other unmarried women who felt comfortable identifying as "single" and who shared a similar middle-class, non-elite status. It was often difficult to recruit non-elite women who felt comfortable identifying as "single," though. Many would voice objections like "I'm not that kind of woman"—perceiving "single" as a kind of radical or sexualized identity. Ajay and Anindita had earlier joined a different, more public-facing support organization for single and lesbian women, but found the English-speaking members there too elite and snobbish. Among other interlocutors, cases of strong friendships existed as well, as I get to at the chapter's end. However, more often I witnessed serious obstacles to friendships faced by adult single women.

These obstacles come in several forms. First, in this marriage-centric society, married and unmarried women tend to become quite separated in divergent social worlds. The concept of "friend" (*bondhu*) for women is often interpreted to mean a childhood or college "girlfriend" (*bandhobi*), generally conceived to be a young

woman or girl not yet married. When I would ask adult single women if they had any friends (using the more generic, gender-neutral *bondhu*), they would frequently reply something like: “No, not any more. I used to have girlfriends (*bandhobi*) when young and in school, but now they’re all married. None of my other girlfriends remained unmarried like me.” Single women told of how these married girlfriends are now tied up with household/family life (*shongshar*) and cannot go out. Women often have only limited access to their sisters once married, and the same holds for married former girlfriends.

These barriers are class based to a large degree, as several of my most elite interlocutors had close friends with whom they would go out for coffee and shopping, talk on the phone, and get together for drinks or a meal. However, as mentioned in chapter 5, even these elite women tell of how married women among their professional colleagues and former friends often avoid inviting single women to mixed-gender social events, worried that their husbands might be tempted by the single woman’s presumed sexual availability.

Social class distinctions also pose a barrier to forging new friendships. Just as it is difficult to marry across social classes, forming close friendships across class divides is challenging and rare. Only one of my fifty-four interlocutors, Sana, whose story I tell in chapter 5, lived with friends. Keen to find other single women friends with whom she might be able to live or at least spend time, Medha eagerly accompanied me on various research appointments to meet other single women. But few friendships really worked out, in part because none of the women shared precisely Medha’s same class makeup—an obstacle, it turns out, to friendship as well as marriage. With her rural village background, Medha was excluded from the circles of elite Kolkata women. At the same time, her PhD and high professor’s salary made most working-class and rural women feel that she was in a different league.

One might think that those living in the working women’s hostel where I conducted fieldwork could form good friendships there, but differences of age and social class got in the way in the hostel, too. Malobika told of how she has no one she can really mix with at the hostel. In her fifties, she was older than many of the other women, and she also felt a little embarrassed about her lack of education. Each resident had her own distinct class position; some had gone to college, and others not; some spoke English well, and others not; and each woman’s form of employment carried a different level of income and prestige. Sukhi-di, my other key interlocutor from this hostel, told of having friends there in the early days, when she moved in as a younger woman in her forties, but now, in her seventies, she had become too old, and she also found the new generation of working women there not educated or respectable (*bhadro*) enough for her tastes.

In this hostel, I also witnessed a general sense of unfamiliarity with the idea that one could live very intimately with people who are not kin. As I note in chapter 1,

it is not common in India for friends simply to set up an apartment with one another. I would notice the hostel residents' vigilance about maintaining a sense of separateness through protecting their own living, cooking, and dining spaces. Each woman lived two or three to a small room. The practice was that each cooked for herself. The rooms contained no formal kitchens, but each woman would set up her own small kitchen cabinet and cookstove in her own corner of the room or out on the long open-air corridor outside the room, careful not to trespass into her roommates' spaces. There was also the unspoken and spoken (when necessary) rule not to sit on a roommate's bed, such as when a resident is entertaining outside guests. Instead, all guests will sit closely together on their one host's bed, even if the other roommates are out for the evening or away for several weeks. The hostel women say that one is lucky to have a roommate who will offer tea when one is ill, but that most residents do not become close friends.

Interestingly, I have noticed some close and mutually caring friendships develop among residents in old age homes, and this seems partly driven by the fact that most Indian elder-home residents eat food cooked and served from the same hearth, often together in a shared dining room. Because of this commensality, some elder-home residents tell me that their home is like a large joint family, or literally a "one-rice family" (*ekannaborti poribar*) of old (Lamb 2009: 153, 288n28). Even when Sukhi-di first moved into the West Bengal Working Girls' Hostel during the 1980s, the women residents were all served food as part of the hostel accommodations, eating together in a common dining hall on the ground floor. Sukhi-di attributed this earlier commensality to her ability to form some close friendships in those early days. Now, for some years, group meals were not offered, and each woman resident needed to fend for herself. Further, even the old age home example here highlights how Bengalis often foreground metaphors of family rather than friendship to signify relationships of co-residential intimacy and support.

#### # WHY LOITER: RECKONING WITH RESPECTABILITY AND BARRIERS TO PUBLIC FUN

The ability of single women to achieve a sense of well-being and enjoyment in daily life is also impacted by the ways having fun in public spaces counters prevailing ideologies of women's respectability. In "Defending Frivolous Fun: Feminist Acts of Claiming Public Spaces in South Asia," Shilpa Phadke analyzes how engaging in fun in public spaces in India "troubles the boundaries of what is acceptable behavior for women" (2020: 283–84). "When women claim fun in public spaces, they produce in others not happiness but anxiety, born out of the desire to restrict women in order to control their sexuality" (2020: 283). Katherine Twamley and Juhi Sidharth similarly explore how both middle-class and poor young women in Indian cities contend with shared discourses of gendered



respectability that curtail women's access to non-privatized spaces for purposes other than work, education, or shopping (2019; see also Phadke 2020: 281). Phadke and colleagues' pathbreaking book *Why Loiter?* and the ensuing Why Loiter movement has led to increased public recognition that women as fellow human beings should have the right, as men do, to hang out in public spaces just for fun—or to “loiter,” as this is often called in India.<sup>3</sup> *Why Loiter?* argues that the right to loiter is no more and no less than the right to everyday life in the global city, and that “the inextricable connection of safety to respectability . . . does not keep women safe in public; it effectively bars them from it” (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011: 31).

Such important dialogue on women's access to public spaces for fun in India has not focused on single women per se, but my fieldwork data highlights how the problems Phadke and others describe for women in general are magnified for women alone, particularly outside the elite classes. Many of my non-elite interlocutors experienced tremendous barriers to going out to have fun—*especially as women alone*—despite their desires to be outside, enjoy public spaces, go to movies or plays, enjoy some street food, sip tea, or sit on a park bench.

Expensive cafés and malls are one site where elite single women can feel comfortable simply hanging out alone. Upscale cafés have been flourishing in India's cities over recent years, providing spaces for upper-middle-class and elite women (and men) to feel normal and safe spending public time in casual, unproductive ways, whether alone or in a group, and whether talking, sipping tea, people watching, writing in journals, reading, browsing on laptops, or engaging in other activities of “loitering.” Compared to what one finds in the trendy neighborhoods of Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore, however, in Kolkata it is still more common to see café patrons hanging out in friend groups or as couples rather than solo. For this reason, even some of my elite interlocutors, like Aarini, would never go out alone in Kolkata, and she would be tremendously eager to engage in fun café hopping with me each time I came to town.

Further, for the many single women in my study who could not afford such cafés (where a single cup of tea costs twenty to thirty times the price at an outside stall), who did not have kin with whom they could go out, and who faced barriers to forming friendships for the kinds of reasons described above, going out for pleasure was experienced as practically impossible.<sup>4</sup> Recall Medha, Nayani, and Nita talking over the Valentine's Day lunch (chapter 1) about how much people talk if they see unmarried women going out. Other urban working-class and rural women conveyed similarly how they found it virtually impossible as unmarried women to go out from the home at all, unless traveling directly and vigilantly straight between work and home, viscerally underlining their legitimate purpose going from point A to B, moving determinedly, their eyes gazing down. Phadke, Khan, and Ranade similarly observe the ways women in Mumbai

learn to comport themselves in public: “Every little girl is brought up to know that she must walk a straight line between home and school, home and office, home and her friend or relative’s home, from one ‘sheltered’ space to another” (2011: vii).

Married women in my fieldwork also in different ways often face tremendous barriers to going out, especially if their husbands or parents-in-law prefer that they not do so. I do not expect to be able to go out “loitering” with young married women from rural areas. One afternoon, Roudri and I decided just for fun to slip out during siesta time when her husband and teenage daughters were napping. We talked while walking around the village lanes and then spontaneously went to have a cup of tea at the roadside stall. By the time we got back to her home just about forty-five minutes later, Roudri’s husband was up and agitatedly waiting for his own cup of afternoon tea. According to the two daughters, who were teasing him, their father had awoken and become increasingly agitated the longer we were out: “Where is my wife? Who is going to make me tea? How long do I have to wait for tea?”

Some single women did point out a double standard, though: while performing being a good housewife and devoted mother caring for children, middle-class housewives will often spend the whole school day hanging out chatting together on the sidewalks in front of their children’s schools, sitting on small mats brought from home. If this is not an example of socially acceptable loitering practiced by married women, then what is? Kumkum asked. In *Why Loiter?*, Phadke, Khan, and Ranade point out how “marriage, especially coupled with appropriate gender performance, often gives women greater access to public space. In comparison, single women tend to be policed more stringently” (2011: 34).

Malobika, who lived in the working women’s hostel and who cared lovingly for Gopal, confessed to how much she loves to go out and do things, but told of how she cannot go out, since she has no one to go out with. After her mother died, with whom she had shared a rented flat, Malobika moved in briefly with her married sister. The two of them really enjoyed going out together, visiting places, and seeing movies. Those excursions ended when Malobika moved into the hostel. Malobika still talks by phone with her sister, but her sister’s in-laws don’t like her heading out alone to meet up with Malobika.

Learning of how much Malobika enjoys going out, my research assistant Anindita and I invited her to meet up with us one day at the popular open-air Dakshinapan Shopping Complex near her hostel. Malobika was delighted to accept, and she fondly prepared a beautiful picnic for us, saying that she preferred to hang out in the open air on the complex’s broad cement steps rather than spending money in one of the shops. She laid out a brightly colored cotton picnic blanket and pulled out stainless steel tins of meticulously prepared foods, including puffy luchi breads, *aloor dum*, or spiced baby potatoes, and boiled eggs. Malobika

said this was the first time she had gone out for fun in over a year, and we talked, laughed, lingered, and enjoyed our time together.

After the picnic, Anindita and I wished to treat Malobika to tea at the popular Dolly's Tea Shop, where I frequently (often without reflecting on my own privileged class status) joined other moneyed women patrons, writing fieldnotes, chatting with a research assistant or friend, or simply hanging out, taking a break from the bustling streets. I mistakenly assumed Malobika would also enjoy the treat. But she was visibly ill at ease. Anindita and I sensed her class discomfort as a working-class woman. She knew she did not "fit" there. She looked around uncomfortably while speaking in hushed tones. She also vehemently objected to our spending 200 rupees on a cup of tea when one could get perfectly fine tea outside for just 10 rupees. On our way back to Malobika's hostel, she proudly treated us to fried battered eggplant and hot tea from a crowded street stall—which we relished eating as three women together claiming fun in a public space.

Some women seemed to accept without overt critique the restrictions of patriarchal culture limiting women's access to public spaces. Others engaged in critique, humiliation, and struggle, and what Phadke describes as "an inordinate amount of subterfuge and strategizing" to access fun in public space (Phadke 2020: 282–283)—examples of "rebellious bodies of women who refuse to stay within limits defined by a patriarchal culture" (290).

Focusing here on her desire to be able to smoke for pleasure alone in public as a woman, Sanjaya pronounced that "women still can't really be free in Kolkata. . . . For instance, I do smoke," Sanjaya declared. "I enjoy smoking. I even smoke on the road. But I feel very uncomfortable." She told of how she smokes anyway, to resist unequal gendered norms. "But then, if I light up a cigarette outside, I'm immediately stared at by 150 people. They will almost force me to throw out my cigarette into the road. You feel so humiliated. Maybe another five or ten men will even be smoking right there, on the same road, and no one will look at them! Even those very same five men will look at *me* critically." Her voice conveyed her anger. "They will say, 'Oh, seeing you smoking looks so bad.'"

In such daily ways, single women strategize to access public fun, while being pressed to enact appropriate femininity and respectability again and again each time they enter public space.<sup>5</sup>

As a conclusion to this section on public fun and pleasure, let us consider Rituparno Ghosh's award-winning 2000 Bengali film *Bariwali* (*The Lady of the House*), which exposes the crude reality of oppression faced by a lonely, repressed, never-married woman who is cloistered away from pleasure and sociability amid conventional systems of propriety. The quiet drama centers on Banalata, a middle-aged single woman who has lived a solitary existence as the only surviving lineage member in her ancestral home ever since her husband-to-be died from a snake bite on the eve of their arranged wedding. Banalata's

solitary and drab existence livens up briefly when she agrees to allow a film crew to shoot in a wing of her aristocratic mansion on the outskirts of Kolkata. Suddenly her household is filled with movie stars and glamorous people, including the charismatic director, Dipankar, who flirts with Banalata and persuades her to act in a bit part in the film. Banalata tells the director, matter-of-factly conveying the cloistered nature of her unmarried woman's life: "Actually, I don't go out (*baire*) anywhere at all. I don't mix with anyone" (R. Ghosh 2000: 1:10). Yet, amid her monotonous days devoid of pleasure, Banalata still yearns for erotic love. She is overcome while watching her young maid being caressed by her suitor in the garden below, and she dreams of the filmmaker slowly removing an elaborately embroidered quilt from her body as she lies writhing in passion on her bed's white linen, her feet twisting together, decorated with the vibrant red *alta*, symbolizing feminine attractiveness, auspiciousness, and fertility.<sup>6</sup> However, once the film crew departs, things at the estate return to the same grueling tedium as before; only now Banalata feels the isolation and monotony of her life all the more acutely.

The other women in the film with the potential for marriage are portrayed as lively, attractive, and optimistic. In contrast, the unmarried Banalata moves slowly and hesitantly, her appearance drab and somewhat disheveled, her craving for marriage never dissipating, and evoking the viewer's pity. As an unmarried woman, she maintains the conventions of feminine propriety, never actualizing a relationship with the filmmaker and never leaving the confines of her domestic space; but the filmmaker depicts her world as almost unlivable. Rohit Dasgupta and Tanmayee Banerjee describe how the film "brings the ostracized figure of the spinster to the center, . . . pulling back the veneer of social norms to expose the crude reality of exploitation lying underneath, [and] . . . throwing the conventional sense of propriety into question" (2016: 44–45).

#### CAN SINGLE WOMEN REALLY HAVE FUN? PURSUING PLEASURE, FRIENDSHIPS, AND FUN IN DAILY LIFE

Amid all these social and cultural constraints upon pleasure and enjoyment in single women's lives, *can* single women also have fun? The women in my study most able to achieve fun and enjoyment in daily life were mainly middle class and higher who had incomes of their own and who either lived apart from natal kin (such as alone or in the working women's hostel) or whose natal kin supported their sense of independence regarding daily movements, activities, and spending. Several women in these groups conveyed how learning to enjoy life on one's own contributed to an important sense of empowerment and self-worth, contrasting their society's negative messaging about singlehood.<sup>7</sup> For these women, sources of enjoyment, pleasure, and fun included the following:

- Enjoying delicious foods
- Focusing on one's own self, health, and body—such as by exercising (daily walking, yoga, calisthenics), using self-nurturing body products (lotions, hair oils), and purchasing attractive clothing
- Decorating and purchasing nice items for one's home
- Traveling (either solo or with friends)
- Cultivating friendships (despite the obstacles)
- Growing flowers and vegetables in balcony pots or in the ground
- Going out to plays and movies (by oneself or with friends)
- Reading for pleasure
- Pursuing meaningful activities, like important social justice projects and a fulfilling career
- Learning to enjoy one's own company
- Developing positive attitudes, such as accepting one's singleness and life as it is

The narratives of the mostly elite single women from India's metros shared in Kalpana Sharma's 2019 *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women!* convey many of these same strategies for pursuing enjoyment and pleasure. Note how the performative exclamation point in the title pronounces and celebrates the potential for happiness in singlehood.

Travel especially was a favorite practice of pleasure enthusiastically embraced by many single women in my study. Sukhi-di's roommate in the West Bengal Working Girls' Hostel, Mita—a middle-class never-married woman in her forties—articulated how being single enhances a woman's opportunities to engage in the delights of travel: "I love to travel! If you get trapped in household/family life [*shongshar*, that is, by marrying], then you can't do anything like that. But we can travel freely." Mita travels by train a few times per year with two of her childhood girlfriends who also never married and now live in the same working women's hostel.

Some women among my interlocutors were also bold and adventurous enough to travel alone, like Medha and Aarini. Recall, however, Aarini's difficulties in finding accommodations as an unaccompanied single woman, and her strategy of booking rooms in advance by saying that she would be traveling with her aunt (chapter 5). Because of such hassles, women were always on the lookout for other single women with whom they might be able to travel and have fun.

Sanjaya, the survivor of childhood polio, had purposefully developed techniques for her and other single women to cultivate a sustaining and fun community of friends with whom to hang out, offer mutual support, and have fun. Seen by her family and semi-urban natal village community as unmarriageable due to her limp, Sanjaya had made the decision after completing college and a master's degree to move out from the demoralizing environment of her natal home to

establish her own apartment in a working-middle-class neighborhood of Kolkata. Her work founding an activist organization geared toward training and supporting women with disabilities connected her with like-minded colleagues around the world. She also organized the informal, vibrant support group for other single women who mostly identified as lesbians, although Sanjaya saw herself as heterosexual. This group of about ten women became fast friends who offered each other a lot of support while also having fun together—sharing tea and hot street foods at their weekly Friday evening meetings; traveling once or twice per year by train to destinations where they share hotel rooms, drink, and laugh with one another; and agreeing to count on each other in times of sickness and other need.

In addition to avidly pursuing social justice causes, mentoring her university students, exercising, and reading novel after novel, Medha had cultivated the enjoyment of partaking in an elite cosmopolitan lifestyle and aesthetic, pleasures that she had only earlier fantasized about while growing up poor and first reading about the wider world from a remote village library. Even now, she is amazed at how comfortably her salary supports her, allowing her to purchase expensive organic foods, attractive clothing, and modern accessories like iPhones and a washing machine. She (and others, like Aarini, Nayani, Kumkum, and Indrani) also loves to decorate her home with beautiful, brightly colored handmade curtains, colorful throw pillows, pleasing lights, and bountiful plants.

My own fieldwork with single women was also often so pleasurable for me—fun!—as I myself love to be out of the home, go out and do things, travel, loiter in cafés and outdoor parks, and have fun in public spaces. Never before conducting fieldwork for any other project have I had so many opportunities to hang out and do fun things with the people I was also “studying.” Such hanging out was made possible by the unique freedom from family/household life experienced by many single women.

Perhaps the pinnacle of fun in my fieldwork experiences was the Himalayan trip four of us embarked on in November 2018. Aarini, Medha, and I recruited one additional never-married woman from Delhi, an old friend of mine. It turned out, sadly, that Medha and Aarini had to drop out from the Himalayan trek part of the journey due to concerns over the challenging nature of the planned route and other issues. But we started our trip together on the airplane and train, and for the first night in a lovely hill lodge, talking and laughing over dinner and breakfast. From there, Aarini went off on a solo pilgrimage, and Medha joined her new male friend and a few of his friends to go on a road trip in the mountains. My Delhi single friend and I took the most amazing weeklong Himalayan trek (figure 5). It is difficult to imagine pulling this journey off if she and the others had been married.





FIGURE 5. Pleasure, friendship, and fun in the Himalayas. Photo by author.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter's materials highlight pleasure and leisure as domains carved up differently for married and single women. Middle-class and elite single women with independent incomes can be successful at pushing boundaries to create meaningful spaces of pleasure and fun in daily life. Recall how Medha proclaimed exuberantly, as reported in chapter 4: "I finally realize now that compared to other Bengali women, I have so much privilege! I have a salary, education, a meaningful job, respect, and freedom. I say to myself each day inside: 'I am a happy soul. I am a peaceful soul.' . . . I've had an absolute transformation! . . . All the times I cried with you before—now what a transformation. I'm having fun (*moja*)! And I'm really happy!"

Yet, the chapter has also had to convey just how difficult it is to have fun and to pursue pleasure as a single woman in India. Others may envy the single woman, imagining how much fun, freedom, and adventure singlehood can offer; but being outside the norm as an unmarried woman also creates a wealth of barriers to friendships, to access to public spaces, to pursuing pleasures, to having fun.

It would be enjoyable to write a chapter on pleasure, friendships, and fun that highlighted only delightful fun. But to meaningfully understand the nature of fun and pleasure in singlehood, I have found that I must consider both the possibilities for, and barriers to, achieving pleasure and fun in daily life.